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The Critical Role of Civic Learning: Preparing Today's Children to Meet Tomorrow's Challenges

SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR, *Associate Justice*
Supreme Court of the United States

Teaching the skills of citizenship may seem like an old-fashioned notion, but in fact nothing could be more forward-looking than preparing each generation to confront effectively the challenges that face us as a nation.

From our earliest days, our founders viewed education as integral to the health and strength of our republic. Thomas Jefferson argued that education is a means to preserve self-rule and create a larger pool from which to draw wise lawmakers. Noah Webster argued that poor legislative decisions rarely result from bad intentions; rather, they come from ignorance. The more knowledgeable the population, the "more perfect will be the laws of a republican state."[1]

Horace Mann, in advocating for his common school movement, noted that citizens must "understand something of the true nature and functions of the government under which they live," and concluded that if a republic lacks a citizenry educated in the roles and responsibilities of the government, a republic is little more than a "political solecism."[2]

This early recognition of the need for an educated citizenry is reflected in the documents, if not the practices, of many states. Forty state constitutions recognize the need for civic literacy, and

thirteen state constitutions specifically point to civic education as the primary purpose of schools.

This concept has waned in the past few decades, however. I remember spending many hours in grade school learning about the three branches of government, the Constitution, and our system of government. Up until the 1960s, students typically had several classes in government or civics. Today, the only exposure to civics many students have is during a one-semester government class in high school.

Statistics demonstrate the effects of this lack of meaningful civic instruction. On the last National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), two-thirds of students scored below proficiency. Only seven percent of eighth graders can name the three branches of government. Less than one-third can identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, despite it being right there in the name. Adults are faring no better than their children. Two-thirds of Americans cannot name a single Supreme Court justice, and only one in seven can correctly name the chief justice of the United States.

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There is not just a lack of knowledge of basic facts and figures. Less than one-fifth of high school seniors can explain how citizen participation benefits democracy. These same high schoolers cannot name a single activity that is part of civic life, activities like serving on a jury and volunteering in the community. Our next generation of voters struggles even to identify something as vital and basic as voting as a part of civic life.

Students are not the only ones getting left behind. According to a 2011 study, American public school teachers of civics and social studies feel like they themselves are being left behind: 70 percent said that their subject is a lower priority because of intensifying pressures on educators to show progress in math and reading.

Math and reading are vitally important, but so is preparing the next generation to confront the problems that challenge us as a nation. This is what robust civic education can do. It equips our children and our children's children to tackle the challenges they will surely inherit. There is a direct correlation between an individual's civic knowledge and higher levels of political participation and expression of democratic values.[3]

Today we face questions about our economy, national security, foreign relations, health care and the environment. We will face questions on these same issues tomorrow. In order to have productive debates and dialogues about these and other complex issues, as a people we need skills in math, literacy, science and 21st century citizenship. After all, citizenship is about both knowledge and skills, skills that include the ability to think critically about issues, engage in thoughtful discussion and debate, and understand the political processes through which we can act. These abilities are not handed down through the gene pool. They must be taught and learned anew by each generation. Civic learning is always important, whether you are an Arizona cowgirl, a New York City-slicker or somewhere in between. Regardless of where we come from and regardless of what we grow up to be, each and every one of us is a member of the community in which we live.

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Civic learning may be relevant for each of us, but it may not always seem relevant to each of us. Civic learning should be and is being modernized. Technology today plays an important role in both education and civic life. Candidates are debating on YouTube, politicians are communicating with constituents on Facebook, and millions of people follow democratic uprisings around the world on Twitter.

Technology and innovations need to be harnessed in civic learning,

as well. I spent nearly 25 rewarding and challenging years as an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. When I retired in 2006, I was not exactly a spring chicken. I was, however, determined to help restore civic education to America's schools. I brought together some experts in education, the law and technology, and together we came up with a solution that involved this old Arizona cowgirl singing the praises of video games. Not just any video games, but games designed to teach kids about important civic topics.

Games can be a highly effective educational tool, especially for civics. When you play a game, you are learning rules, understanding a system, and trying to achieve goals and objectives—just as you do as the member of a community. Today, iCivics, the organization that I founded after I retired, offers 16 games and a rich variety of free curricular materials to excite and engage students. I have had children tell me how much fun they have had playing iCivics and learning about civics—all on their own. I have also had teachers share stories of how the program has engaged and delighted their students, turning civics from a dry and dusty topic to a class children greatly enjoy. This new digital age gives us many opportunities to create platforms for and instill excitement about civic learning and engagement.

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Cultivating a citizenry knowledgeable about civics should be a critical priority. It is essential to our nation's future and the health of our democracy. Only through outreach and education will the next generation fully appreciate the role they play in their communities and in the great questions facing our democracy. Only through such efforts will the next generation comprehend the fundamental value of our system of government and be prepared for success in the global marketplace today and tomorrow.

We are at a turning point. Some states like Florida and Tennessee have passed legislation requiring proficiency in civics. Others

are poised to follow that lead. The United States Department of Education, under the leadership of Secretary Arne Duncan, is promoting the need for a greater commitment to civic education. But Secretary Duncan cannot do it alone. I cannot do it alone. To make our democracy work, we must all take a role in restoring a commitment to civic knowledge and engagement and creating the next generation of informed and engaged citizens.

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We can do that by supporting civic education. We can do that by making sure teachers have the resources they need in their classrooms. We can do that by maintaining a steady drumbeat of conversation about how vital civic education is to the continued health of our democracy. It is up to all of us to make sure the next generation will be ready to take up their civic rights and responsibilities. Will *you* help?

Notes

1. Noah Webster, "On the Education of Youth in America" (1790).
2. Horace Mann, "Twelfth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Massachusetts School Board" (1848).
3. William A. Galston, "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education," *Annual Review of Political Science* (2001).

Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States, where she served as an associate justice for 25 years. Prior to her appointment to the Court, Justice O'Connor served in all three branches of Arizona state government as Assistant Attorney General, Senate majority leader, and Appeals Court Judge. She is the founder and chair of iCivics. To learn more about iCivics, please visit iCivics.org.